

derrida and the philosophical history of wonder

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Contemporary philosophers do not often explicitly discuss wonder. Yet its philosophical history resonates in discussions of knowledge in relation to imagination and emotion. This is especially true of Jacques Derrida's writings. One of the many striking features of his work is his skill in integrating insights into the history of philosophy with critique of current issues. His analyses of contemporary culture and politics often emerge from close readings of particular philosophical and literary texts; and those readings often resonate with the philosophical history of wonder. He rarely discusses wonder directly. Yet he had a deep interest in issues arising around the ancient idea of *aporia*—the condition in which the perplexed mind seems to come to a halt with no path to follow. The connections between *aporia* and wonder are of course at the heart of ancient Greek accounts of the beginnings of philosophy. To see just how much Derrida's thought resonates with the philosophical history of wonder, it is helpful first to return briefly to those ancient beginnings.

Both Plato and Aristotle stress that philosophy begins in wonder. Plato opens his late dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, with a powerful evocation of wonder. There, he has Socrates talk of it as an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher: "This," he says, "is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." It is proneness to wonder that makes the boy Theaetetus an ideal student for Socrates. He is eager to be drawn into the kind of bewilderment that brings intellectual activity to

a temporary standstill, when the mind does not know how to go on. Drawn into Socratic questioning, Theaetetus says, “I often wonder like mad what these things can mean; sometimes when I’m looking at them I begin to feel quite giddy.”² In describing the boy’s capacity for intellectual inquiry, Plato gives to Theodorus, his mentor in mathematics, a metaphor which evokes a calm serenity of mind in motion—a coming together of passivity and activity; of stasis and movement. The boy, Theodorus says, approaches his studies in a way reminiscent of “the quiet flow of a stream of oil.”³

The tensions evoked there between intellectual motion and rest—and the idea of their ultimate co-existence—recur throughout the rest of the dialogue. Socrates does not seek to cure Theaetetus of his initial state of “giddiness.” The boy continues to “wonder like mad”; but he comes to a better understanding of that state—and at the same time to a deeper appreciation of the intellectual character which Socrates attributes to the philosopher. It becomes clear that the art of thinking, as Socrates teaches it, does not lead to definitive conclusions. Theaetetus is initiated into a kind of thinking which originates in perplexity and wonder; and, rather than rejecting that condition, Socrates’ exercise of intellectual “midwifery,” as he describes it, transforms it into a more virtuous form of not-knowing.

“And so, Theaetetus,” says Socrates in concluding the initiation, “if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this enquiry.” In consequence, his companions will find him “gentler and less tiresome”—more modest, not thinking that he knows what he does not know. “This,” Socrates says, “is all my art can achieve—nothing more.”⁴ Towards that end, Socrates works on inducing those states of perplexity which excite and attract the young Theaetetus—states where the mind is brought to an impasse, not knowing where to go.

The *Theaetetus* can be read as an account of the initiation of a young mind into philosophy as a specific kind of intellectual inquiry—a kind of thinking that begins and persists in wonder, construed as acknowledged not-knowing. However, there is also something of broader significance here than the origins of what we now know as philosophy. We are thrown into perplexity—into wonder—when ever our established beliefs and habitual expectations are shaken—when things long taken for granted are exposed to challenge.

Wonder, as well as being the beginnings of philosophy, can be the beginnings of political consciousness. Plato's Socrates is well aware of this. He sets himself the task of inducing wonder in others as a social good. The dialogue ends with Socrates going off to face the charge of corrupting youth. The outcome of that charge will of course be the sentencing of Socrates to death—the story of which is told in other dialogues. The *Theaetetus* dramatises this “corruption” of the young and foreshadows the outcomes of that allegedly subversive activity. As well as being an exercise in the definition of knowledge, the dialogue is thus a defence of the role of Socratic inquiry as social critique—and of the place of wonder in that critique.

Aristotle reinforced Plato's idea of philosophy as beginning in wonder, while refining it. In the *Metaphysics*, he says that philosophy is distinguished from other forms of knowledge by the largeness of its subject matter—its concern with “greater matters”—the moon, sun, stars, and the genesis of the universe. But there is also, he thinks, something distinctive about the kind of thinking involved—a certain kind of wavering or vacillation in the mind's movement. Aristotle spells this out as a sort of hovering between knowing and not-knowing. That, he suggests, gives philosophy—“the love of wisdom”—something in common with myth. For lovers of myth, he says, are also in a sense lovers of wisdom, since myths are composed of things not completely understood—of wonders.⁵

For both Plato and Aristotle, the not-knowing involved in wonder is not just an acknowledged absence of knowledge. It is a kind of not-knowing which brings with it an intense desire to understand. In Book I of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle emphasises the connections of wonder with desire and pleasure. Learning and wondering, he says there, are both as a rule pleasant. Wondering implies “the desire of learning, so that the object of wonder is an object of desire; while in learning one is brought into one's natural condition.”⁶ St Thomas Aquinas was later to take that observation further when, in the *Summa Theologiae* (Second Part, I, Q32, Art. 8), he glossed it by saying that wonder is a certain sort of desire: the wondering mind yearns for what is its own good—the satisfaction of its deep desire to know.

There are tensions in those old accounts of wonder—between activity and passivity; motion and stasis. There are tensions too between the images evoked in describing wonder. On the one hand, it is directionless wandering—fluctuation and vacillation; on the other hand, it is purposeful movement towards knowledge as a determinate and strongly desired end. There is also the sense of something

to be hoped for—a reconciliation of motion and rest. However, the aspect of ancient wonder which resonates most strongly in Derrida’s sustained development of the old Socratic idea of *aporia* is the idea of the blocked path—the intellectual impasse, when the mind is brought to a halt. He makes the continuities with ancient ideas of *aporia* explicit in the lectures published in 1992 as the volume called *Aporias*. What he offers there is, he says, a revitalised version of the “old, worn-out Greek term *aporia*, this tired word of philosophy and of logic.”⁷

At the core of this revitalisation is Derrida’s emphasis on the notion of singularity. What is fascinating in this experience of *aporia*, he says, is that we are “singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness.” In the experience of *aporia* we are “disarmed, delivered to the other.” This emphasis on singularity is a striking—and in some ways perplexing—elaboration of the ancient idea of *aporia* as the blocked path allowing nowhere to go. How does *aporia* yield our “naked uniqueness” or the “deliverance to the other”? How did “otherness” get into the picture?

The trajectory of Derrida’s thinking here becomes clearer in the light of his discussion of *aporia* in *Memoires of Paul de Man*, originally delivered as lectures in 1984. Talking there of de Man’s frequent appeal to the notion of *aporia* in his last texts, he has this to say:

I believe that we would misunderstand it if we tried to hold it to its most literal meaning: an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks, the immobilisation of thinking, the impossibility of advancing, a barrier blocking the future. On the contrary, it seems to me that the experience of the *aporia*, such as de Man deciphers it, gives or promises the thinking of the path, provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible. The figures of rationality are profiled and outlined in the madness of the *aporetic*.⁸

Aporia for Derrida, following de Man on this point, is not just the absence of a path forward for thought. There is an important shift of emphasis here, though it’s not inconsistent with the ancient Greek idea. The intellectual hiatus—the mind’s loss of movement—is to be taken, not as an incipient state of paralysis, but rather as a constructive pause in its ongoing activity. Derrida’s version of *aporia* involves a style of thinking—a reflective response, which transforms the experience of the path lost. It becomes a pause for reflection; yet Derrida’s account of it also resists

any bland idea of moving forward: “When someone suggests to you a solution for escaping an impasse, you can be almost sure that he is ceasing to understand, assuming that he had understood anything up to that point.”⁹ We have here an elaboration, and enrichment, of ancient *aporia*. It is a significant development which can, I suggest, be made clearer by looking back to an intervening moment in the philosophical history of wonder: Spinoza’s repudiation of Descartes’s treatment of wonder and of its place in the life of the mind.

In his account of wonder in *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes had argued that, although useful in beginning inquiry, it also poses real threats to the gaining of knowledge. Wonder, as a “sudden surprise of the soul,” brings a heightening of attention under the impact of the unexpected. However, that surprise all too readily turns to the excessive state of “astonishment,” which can render the whole body “as immobile as a statue.” Those who are not at all prone to wonder are, he says, usually very ignorant. Yet often we wonder too much, rather than too little; for we can become transfixed with astonishment at things that don’t really merit much consideration.¹⁰

According to Descartes, becoming like statues by wondering too much is a greater risk than that posed by mere ignorance resulting from wondering too little. The “uncorrected habit” of wonder can leave us afflicted with “blind curiosity”—“seeking out rarities simply in order to wonder at them, and not in order to know them.” Fortunately, though—as with other excessive states of passion—a virtuous exercise of will can come to the rescue. The discerning mind can set aside the risky passion of wonder, making good its absence through the will, which can always impose on our understanding a “special state of attention and reflection” when we judge the matter before us to be worth serious consideration.¹¹

About all that, Spinoza was scathing in his discussion of emotions in Part III of the *Ethics*. He rejected the whole idea of minds acting on bodies through the causal intervention of supposedly free will. Like Descartes, he saw wonder as involving an intermission in mental activity—a coming-to-a-stop, in the face of something unfamiliar. The upshot of his analysis is, however, radically different—with ramifications for what we can now make of Derrida’s revitalisation of ancient ideas of *aporia*.

For Spinoza wonder is, strictly, not a passion—or indeed any kind of affect or emotion at all. For him emotions are necessarily transitions in activity. They involve

mental movement. So a state in which there is no mental movement— where thought comes to a halt— is not an emotion. Yet the presence of wonder is crucial to the formation and transformations of a wide range of emotions. Wonder, for Spinoza, is crucial to the life of the mind.

Spinoza's critique of Descartes's treatment of wonder is a conjunction of subtlety and sarcasm—at once playful and devastating. It is a sustained reflection on the experience of hiatus in mental activity—on the state which, he agrees with Descartes, is the core of wonder. Putting together his rejection of the Cartesian view of mind and body as causally interacting, and his rejection of the idea of free will—both of which are essential to the Cartesian account—what emerges is that wonder is located in a non-causal relation of mind to body. Mind is related to body as an idea to its object. Wonder belongs in that relationship between the mind as “idea” and the body which is its “object.” It arises in the mind's initial response to something unfamiliar—something not understood—happening in the body of which it is the idea. We have here another twist to the old idea that philosophy begins in wonder. The mind responds to its own body as to something it does not understand, and which nonetheless it must understand in order to be what it is. All that suggests that, according to Spinoza, wonder is necessary for the mind's continued existence.

It is of course a strange and intriguing notion—this suggestion that minds respond to their own bodies in wonder; and that this wondering response is necessary to their very being. Spinoza elaborates it through a clever and playful diversion, in which he expresses the wonder which he claims he himself experiences when he confronts Descartes's preposterous alternative theory—that wonder is a passion of the soul, arising somehow from its causal interactions with body. Surprise was at the core of Descartes's account of wonder. Spinoza agrees with that. However, in response to Descartes's account of wonder as a passion produced in the soul by body, Spinoza presents himself as very surprised indeed.

In Part III of the *Ethics*, he observes that “no one knows how, or by what means, the Mind moves the body.” So “when men say that this or that action of the body arises from the Mind, which has dominion over the Body, they do not know what they are saying, and they do nothing but confess, in fine sounding words, that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action, and that they do not wonder at it.”¹² Spinoza's point there was to insist that the body itself, “simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its Mind wonders at.” Descartes would not

have disagreed with that. He held that there are many movements of which bodies are capable without causal intervention of minds. However, in the Preface to Part V, Spinoza returns to the theme in a way that is explicitly directed against the Cartesian treatment of minds as separately existing individual substances, capable of causally interacting with bodies. Here, he presents Descartes's lack of wonder at his own outrageous theory as itself an appropriate object of wonder. Faced with Descartes's account of the passions of the soul in terms of causal interactions between mind and body, he says, "I cannot wonder enough that a Philosopher of his calibre ... one who had so often censured the Scholastics for wishing to explain obscure things by occult qualities ... should assume a Hypothesis more occult than any occult quality."¹³

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Taking the passages together, we can read Spinoza as mocking Descartes's version of the surprise at the heart of wonder. The minds of his opponents, he seems to imply, are so habituated to the acceptance of the mysterious that their acknowledged not-knowing does not even trigger wonder. Their minds are closed. In his own treatment of wonder, surprise remains; but it is differently construed. The emphasis shifts from the psychological state to a more formal consideration of singularity among objects of attention.

The role of imagination is crucial here. In the Definitions of the Affects, at the end of Part III, wonder is "an imagination of a thing in which the Mind remains fixed because this singular imagination has no connection with the others."¹⁴ In other words, the mind is brought to a standstill when confronted by singularity. What Spinoza here calls *singularity* is a richer notion than Descartes's version of surprise. It involves an intellectual challenge, rather than a potentially paralysing psychological state. It is here that we see the affinities between Spinoza's treatment of wonder and Derrida's version of the notion of *aporia*.

In Spinoza's more general account of knowledge, imagination has the role of bringing things together for comparison; and this is where singularity comes in. When the imagination encounters something singular, it cannot bring it together with other things. "This affection of the Mind, or this imagination of a singular thing, insofar as it is alone in the Mind is called Wonder."¹⁵

If wonder brings the exercise of imagination to a halt, the mind's search for commonalities is also blocked. By treating wonder as involving a fixation of the imagination, Spinoza gives more content than Descartes could to what actually happens

in the mental hiatus which both see as characteristic of wonder. Wonder, Spinoza says, is a “distraction of the Mind,” that arises from the fact that there is no cause “determining the Mind to pass from regarding one thing to thinking of others.”¹⁶

Spinoza thus acknowledges the power of wonder to impede mental activity. Yet his treatment of wonder reflects a much more positive evaluation of its role in the life of the mind than Descartes’s cautionary approach. For Spinoza wonder is not a threat, needing to be controlled by an extraneous virtuous will. That is fortunate, because for him there is no such thing as the will—whether virtuous or wicked. However, the mental hiatus associated with wonder brings its own restorative activity. Encountering singularity, imagination initially finds no room to move. Yet, having been stopped in its tracks, it must then resort to less obvious resemblances, finding a way forward to grasp commonalities. The mind steps back, as it were, in order to leap forward. Its urge to continue thinking—its striving to understand—is what Spinoza calls its *conatus*: a thing’s effort to persist in being what it is. Each blocked pathway for the imagination thus becomes an impetus to find a way forward. The inherent effort to understand—which is just as characteristic of wonder as the initial hiatus it induces—brings of itself the relief from paralysis, which Descartes had sought in a spurious exercise of will over passion.

So we have here another version of the ancient dictum that intellectual inquiry begins in wonder. Wonder arises from the imagination’s encounter with unexpected singularity, which drives a need—indeed a necessity—for better understanding. Wonder is no longer construed as a passion in need of external control. It now becomes inherent in the mind’s on-going striving to understand body—and hence to understand itself, as the idea which has body as its object.

Spinoza’s opponents—on his scathing account of them—acquiesce in mystery. They do not even wonder at the strangeness of the supposed interactions between mind and body to which they appeal in explaining the nature of human emotion—including wonder itself. They lack the self-reflection to realise that their inquiries have come to a premature dead-end. Insofar as the Cartesians believed that those mental affections which were “passions of the soul”—and their “remedies”—involved a causal interaction between minds and bodies, they were included among the targets of Spinoza’s attack. Descartes expressed concern about excessive wonder. Spinoza turns the tables on the Cartesians, suggesting that their incoherent version of mind-body relations indicates that they do not wonder enough.

On Spinoza's account, then, wonder—rather than being at odds with the pursuit of knowledge—co-exists with, and strengthens, it. Although it brings the mind to a temporary halt in its efforts to understand itself and the world, wonder is also readily—indeed necessarily—redirected at the remarkable capacities of human bodies in interaction with one another and with other things. Properly understood, the mind's encounters with apparent “mysteries” thus become an impetus to its efforts to understand the world and its own place in it. Let me now bring all this back to Derrida.

I suggested earlier that his notion of *aporia* is rich with the philosophical history of wonder. He does not, to my knowledge, ever deal directly with Spinoza's response to Descartes's way of dealing with the intellectual hiatus involved in wonder. Yet the connections are there to be made. The continuities—and the differences—become especially clear in his later seminars, where he reflects on the idea of singularity in relation to hospitality, to sovereignty, to the death penalty, and to death itself. “Singularity” remains a shifting and often perplexing notion which comes up in in much contemporary philosophical debate. It is not always easy to keep a grip on it. The affinities—and the differences—between Derrida's use of it and the ways Spinoza talked of it can help anchor this elusive concept.

For Spinoza, singularity was a feature of the object before us. Struck by its apparent uniqueness, there is initially nowhere for thought to go. The blockage is in the activity of thought; but the singularity resides in the object apprehended. For Derrida in contrast “singularity” seems to be readily applied, not only to the object, but also to the mind's experience in confronting it, and to the mind itself. Yet there is a trajectory of thought which can take us from Spinoza on wonder to Derrida on *aporia*. If what is before us is such that our thinking cannot get any purchase on it at all, then that is to say that this thing confronting us is utterly “other.” In that way, the experience of *aporia* can be said to deliver us to otherness. With nowhere for thought to go, we are thrown back on ourselves. So there is here a reciprocal “otherness”; the thinking self is utterly other to what is before it. There is a lack of common ground—not only between the things we are trying to think about, but also between us and those objects of thought. *Aporia* can thus be seen as a state of incipient alienation. We can hear something like that sequence of thoughts in the resonances of “singularity” in Derrida's late seminars.

In the seminars published as *The Beast and the Sovereign*, singularity is associated with the theme of exceptionalism—with the paradoxical “exceptional” right to

place oneself above the law. Singularity is here the source of instability in the conceptual triad: *beast, human, divine*. It is what can make the sovereign “look like the most brutal beast, who respects nothing, scorns the law, immediately situates himself above the law, at a distance from the law.”¹⁷ Singularity is the basis of the troubling resemblance—the “obscure and fascinating complicity,” as Derrida puts it, between sovereignty, animality, and criminality. The seminars explore that “complicity” from a starting point in the ironic mantra which runs through La Fontaine’s fable “The Lamb and the Wolf”: that the reason of the stronger is always the best. There is of course a deliberate ambiguity here; what is called “the reason of the stronger” might be taken either as the reason that in fact prevails or as the reason that *ought* to prevail—by right and according to justice.

Derrida’s main concern here is with shifts of thought around the theme of singularity in relation to “sovereign” “beast” and “God.” Yet these passages are also pervaded by the sense of wonder. They are evocatively described in terms reminiscent of Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Derrida talks of a vertigo of the mind—a sense “of the bottomless, the abyss,” of “what can make your head spin.”¹⁸ Although he does not talk explicitly of wonder in this context, he does later offer an extended treatment of the closely related—though at first sight antithetical—notion: stupidity. In its French version --*betise*—this form of stupidity evokes animality. Hence its relevance in *Sovereignty and the Beast*. It is an anomalous figure of speech. Drawing on Deleuze’s discussion in *Difference and Repetition*, Derrida reflects on the fact that “*bêtise*” in this sense does not apply to animals. If this be a form of animality, it is one that properly applies only to humans. *Betise*, Derrida wryly observes—evoking a famous remark of Descartes’s—is “that which is proper to man, like good sense, the most equally distributed thing in the world among humans.”¹⁹

Derrida is talking of stupidity. However, it becomes clearer that we are here in the territory of wonder when he moves beyond Deleuze’s discussion of *bêtise* by “following the track of Flaubert.”²⁰ The reference is to *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, Flaubert’s dark comedy about two copy clerks engaged in a passionate and increasingly frantic search for encyclopedic knowledge. The story takes a particularly poignant turn when the clerks develop what the narrator describes as the “piteous faculty” of “seeing *bêtise* and no longer being able to tolerate it.” Discussing this pitiful state, again drawing on Deleuze, Derrida develops the startling hypothesis that *bêtise* is integral to the “structures of thought as such.” With some relish, he elaborates the point in relation to the kind of thinking typically involved in philosophy—its concern with definitive understanding of the natures of things.

Against the background of the philosophical history of wonder, we might say that the upshot of his analysis is that *bêtise* is the other side of wonder. Where there is wonder—the beginnings of philosophy—there too is inherent susceptibility to a certain kind of stupidity.

Clearly, Derrida is being impish in associating philosophy and stupidity. Yet there is a serious point at stake. It becomes clearer in the light of Flaubert's own definition of stupidity in letters which Derrida quotes. While working on *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, he wrote to Louise Colet that stupidity is "wanting to come to a conclusion." From Flaubert's perspective, stupidity resides in wanting the completion of thought—the resolution of the desire to know. The philosophical history of wonder shows us that the desire for that state of completed knowledge is inherent in wonder. Against that background, if Flaubert's provocative description of stupidity is accepted, philosophy can be seen as caught up not only in wonder but also in stupidity.

Flaubert's dark remarks about stupidity are, however, more nuanced than his railings against "wanting to come to a conclusion" suggest. His version of *bêtise* can be associated, not only with the philosopher's desire to come to a definitive conclusion, but also with the refusal to enter into the mental agitation of wonder at all. Derrida also reflects on another letter, written by Flaubert when travelling in Egypt, in which he famously expressed his disgust at finding on the wall of a pyramid, the scrawl of a name: "THOMPSON." "The cretan," he wrote, "has incorporated himself into the monument and perpetuated himself with it."²¹ That vandalism is for Flaubert not just a specific act of stupidity. It becomes stupidity's symbolic enactment. The immobilising of thought is inscribed into the immovability of the monument. There are echoes here of Descartes's fear of wonder's immobilising power, which can make wonder and stupor converge. However, the unfortunate Thompson is immortalised for his failure to engage at all with the spirit of wonder—as the place demands. For Flaubert the foolish Thompson becomes an emblem of acquiescence in an intellectual stasis that is more than a transient state—monumental stupidity, etched in stone.

Flaubert returned to his idea of stupidity as "wanting to come to a conclusion" in the satirical "Dictionary of Received Opinions," which was meant to accompany *Bouvard and Pecuchet*—a list of the mindless clichés elicited in the circulation of common expressions—lifeless platitudes, which acquire the status of benchmarks of collective stupidity. On Derrida's analysis, philosophy—in its desire to

reach conclusions—is itself prone to this descent of thought into the stupidity of “received opinions.” In trying to reach conclusions—to bring to a stop the vacillation of wonder—philosophers themselves can fall into stupidity. Philosophy may begin in the asking of questions. Yet there can, Derrida observes, be a strange and troubling affinity between *bêtise* and a certain obstinacy in asking, or asking oneself, questions. “There is without doubt,” he says, “a *bêtise* of the question, as there is of affirmation, as there is of negation.”²² His point is that not all questioning manifests sustained intellectual activity. The rigidity of thought which is the mark of this kind of stupidity can be enacted in stubborn persistence in asking questions, as well as in dogmatic opinion.

Some of this can pass as teasing play at the expense of the pretensions of philosophers. Yet there is also a serious point at stake. The posture of the philosopher’s effort to understand—to come to a conclusion—can enact proneness to stupidity. We have here, says Derrida, a “mimeticism”—something akin to a “contagion” of *bêtise*. In trying to understand it, he says, “we engender *bêtise* in the very gaze, in the sustained attention, study, or reflection, claiming to know its essence and its meaning.”²³ Thus, to assume that there is an essence of *bêtise* is already a sign of *bêtise*. Again, we can hear echoes there of Descartes’s warning that the mental halt induced by wonder can readily turn into a more prolonged immobility. However, Derrida makes also a more unusual point which he has appropriated from Flaubert’s interest in constructing a “dictionary” of “received Opinions”: this kind of stupidity is a communal, intersubjective matter. It is not something that happens “all on one’s own and by oneself.” It is a collective phenomenon. The stupidity of each is intensified by seeing it enacted by others. The resulting circulation of stale clichés deadens both the individual and the collective life of the mind.

It is in his treatment of death that we see most clearly the richness of Derrida’s version of singularity. Here, again, there are strong resonances of the philosophical history of wonder. The connections between *aporia* and the thought of death were of course already there in Plato’s Socratic dialogues. Confronted with what cannot be readily understood—with the unknown—the mind comes to a halt. It is not surprising then that Socratic *aporia* was already connected with the realisation that it is impossible to really know what, if anything, lies beyond death.

In the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates appeal to that unknowability in his self-defence. To cease his activities of allegedly corrupting the young out of fear of being put to death would be to perversely presume that he knows that death is an evil. For all

that we can know, Socrates reasons, death may in fact be the greatest good; yet we fear it as if we know quite well that it is the greatest of evils. “And what is this,” he asks, “but that shameful ignorance of thinking that we know what we do not know?”²⁴ Socrates is attracted to thinking of death as a good. He insists, however, that he really knows neither that it is a good nor that it is an evil. What most matters is not to claim knowledge which he does not in fact have; and that of course is what he has been teaching the young—allegedly to their corruption.

For Derrida too there are close connections between the experience of *aporia* and the thought of death. We have seen that he gives content to his version of *singularity* by playing with that old motif of *aporia*—having nowhere to move. What emerges from his own enriched version of *aporia* is a singularity that applies both to the mind and to the object it apprehends. *Aporia* is here the idea, not so much of intellectual paralysis, like Descartes’s statue, as of disorientation. Apprehending singularity leaves us lacking any clear sense of where to go. It is a state which can be manifested in restless to-and-fro-ing—in vacillation, as well as in transfixed immobility. This aspect of Derrida’s version of singularity comes out especially in his discussion of Heidegger on “world” and “solitude” in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. It culminates in the Second Session, in the powerful passages on death in relation to Robinson Crusoe’s encounter with the single footprint in the sand.²⁵

Here again there are strong resonances of the philosophical history of wonder. Crusoe is initially paralysed by the footprint—as though he had been struck by lightning or thunder. He is astonished by the apparent evidence of another human presence on “his” island. However, that consternation gives way to an even more disturbing thought. The print becomes more uncanny for being possibly his own, on a path already trodden. A new temporal disorientation now joins the lack of bearings which disturbed him in his early days on the island. It is “as though he were living everything in the past of his own past as a terrifying future.” The future now comes to be thought as the *revenance* of something already past. The temporal disorientation passes over into a fear of death:

He believes he is shortly going to die, that he is running after his death or that death is running after him, that life will have been so short, and thus, as though he were already dead, because of this race with his revenance, everything that happens to him happens not as new, fresh or to come, but as ... already past, already seen, to come as yesterday and not as tomor-

row.²⁶

As in other reflections of Derrida's on time and mortality—on grief and on futurity—he plays here with dislocating the ordinary laws of tense logic in ways that can bring on its own wonder-induced vertigo. “As I run to death always after yesterday, yesterday will always be to come: not tomorrow, in the future, but to come, ahead, there in front, the day before yesterday.” If this be play, it has nonetheless a profound seriousness. It seeks to unravel the deeper logic of emotions caught up in grief, in mourning—whether for others or for one's self. “I am no longer present, I am already yesterday, I enjoy from yesterday because only yesterday will have given me, only my death or the feeling of my death, a death that will have taken me by speed, only my death lets me enjoy and take pleasure—in this very moment.”²⁷

Blanchot in *Writing the Disaster*, which Derrida quotes in these passages on time and death, engages in similar mind-bending verbal play. He speaks of dying as “the imminence of what has always already come to pass.”²⁸ Commenting on that remark, in relation to Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death*, Derrida talks of this “imminence” as “an *unbelievable* tense,” which “seems to deport what has always, from all time, already taken place toward the coming of the to-come.”²⁹ Blanchot also talks also of “the disaster of a time without present which we endure by waiting, by awaiting a misfortune which is not still to come, but which has always already come upon us and which cannot be present.” “In this sense,” he continues, “the future and the past come to the same since both are without present.”³⁰

It can all sound like mesmerising linguistic gymnastics. However, having in mind the philosophical history of wonder can give us insight into the emotional depth of these strange but luminous reflections. It is the unthinkability of what is singular that interconnects wonder and stupidity; and that unthinkability is at its starkest in relation to death. Able to take place only once, death represents, in these passages, ultimate singularity—and hence ultimate unthinkability. In the lack of anything in common with other things we have experienced, death cannot be thought. Yet this dying, is something which “though unsharable, I have in common with all.”³¹ These are complex—even tortuous—passages. There is something deeply paradoxical in the idea of the singular which emerges in them. Yet they resonate with familiar paradoxes of presence and absence, which are part of the universal, and singular, human experience of death.

To engage with the thought here, it can again be helpful to go back to Spinoza. On his approach to wonder, what is singular thereby resists being seen in relation to other things—resists being generalised, and hence being thought. In these passages from Blanchot and Derrida on death, there is a similar sense of nothing to be done—nothing to be said. It is a mark of this paradoxical singularity of death, in the midst of its being common to all, that it is inevitably something at which we are inexperienced. There are resonances here, not only of Spinoza’s treatment of wonder, but also of his tantalising observation in the *Ethics*—often quoted but little understood—that the wise think of death least of all things and that their wisdom is a meditation, not on death, but on life. Reading Derrida and Spinoza together, perhaps we can say that the reason Spinoza’s wise don’t think of death is that they are wise enough to recognise its unthinkability. So much for death. Let me now return in conclusion to wonder in relation to social critique.

Plato had Socrates link his skills in inducing *aporia* to the broader social significance of the kind of thinking that begins in wonder. Perhaps there is a comparable role for Derrida’s version of singularity. The encounter with the unexpected—the as-yet-unassimilated—can stop thought in its tracks in ways that lead on to passionate theoretical inquiry into the natures of things—into what Aristotle called “the greater matters.” Yet the shock of the new—of what seems unbelievable—can be no less powerful when our moral and political expectations of norms and normality are thwarted. Wonder can be the beginning of political consciousness, as well as of more narrowly focused forms of philosophical thinking. When a familiar social, cultural or political world recedes from us, singularity takes on an added starkness.

Wonder—whether it takes the form of awe or of shock—can bring minds to a jarring halt. That disorientation can be the impetus to fresh thinking, breaking the hiatus of wonder to take us in new directions. Yet, given the connections between wonder and stupidity, the unease generated by confrontation with the singular can also cause us to seek relief in familiar narratives—in the recitation of “received opinions.” The disorientation arising from confrontation with the singular can harden into new forms of intellectual paralysis—into what Derrida, following Flaubert, saw as collective *bêtise*.

Collective stupidity, thus understood, is at play in much of the prevailing political discourse of our times—no less than it was in Flaubert’s. Yet railing at stupidity can itself take the form of reiterated trite “received opinion.” Stupidity—in the

form in which we are dealing with it here—is not an episodic lapse of logic or failure of reasoning. It arises from something inherent in human thought—no less than does the capacity for wonder. As Derrida cunningly remarked in his wry twisting of Descartes’s remarks about common sense in the *Discourse on Method*, which I mentioned earlier, stupidity is something equally spread throughout all groups of human thinkers—among all those who engage in argument.

What then can be said, against the background of the philosophical history of wonder, that might help us better understand the phenomenon of collective stupidity as we encounter it—and are caught up in it—in our own times? It may, as Derrida suggests, be self-defeating to try to offer a philosophical definition of stupidity; but, as he also remarked, that does not mean that it is difficult to find examples of it. Identifying and exploring contemporary examples of collective stupidity can be an exercise of philosophically and politically informed intelligence.

What Flaubert and Derrida call *betise* suffuses—not least—current debate on two of the most pressing political challenges of our times—understanding and responding to climate change; and to current mass movements of people in search of safety or relief from poverty. Whatever side we may find ourselves on in those multi-layered and frequently baffling debates, it is not only inadequate but also self-defeating to fall back on exchanging accusations of stupidity. On such topics, it can be counter-productive to proceed as if all that were needed is to have the scales lift from our opponents’ eyes. Stupidity, in this form, arises from a deep need to seek alleviation of the unrest and disorientation which are inherent in our efforts to think.

Derrida has demonstrated how rich a resource informed readings of literary and philosophical texts from the past can be for understanding our present. Talking on a related topic—translation—he says, in concluding the first *Beast and Sovereign* Seminar, that “an interpretive translation brings with it the whole of culture.” Such an exercise is “not separable from historical movements in which all the forces of the world and the age are engaged.” The “whole force of history” is at work in producing it.³² What Derrida calls in this context “interpretive translation” is in important ways similar to his own strategies in offering close readings of literary and philosophical texts; and they are of course often inter-dependent exercises.

Interpretive readings of the kind in which Derrida engages demand extensive scholarship. That they are interpretive does not mean that they abandon ideals of objectivity. It does, though, suggest that offering readings across time of literary and philosophical texts can often be a more creative—and more political—activity than it is commonly regarded. The central point here was already—at any rate on my reading—made by Spinoza in his discussion in the *Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus* of the spurious certainties of biblical narratives.

Faced with dogmatic theologians who maintained their power over the multitude by posing as the authoritative interpreters of objective truth, Spinoza insisted that the narratives contained in Scripture were properly understood as constructs of imagination. As fictions, they were useful for the formation and sustaining of social bonds which allow human life to flourish. Yet those fictions—if they are misconstrued as definitive truths—could also threaten the very flourishing they made possible. Spurious certainties—for Spinoza as later for Flaubert, and for Derrida, can debilitate the life of the mind.

The familiar narratives that bind a human collectivity together can also come to restrict the mind's freedom to move. They can become a source of intellectual paralysis. When we acquiesce in that hardening of thought—when we cease to “wonder enough”—we put ourselves at the mercy of received opinions, mouthing prevailing platitudes that come to be regarded as obvious truths. What begins as wonder can end in stupidity. Yet, when we find ourselves wondering at our collective stupidity, that can itself in turn be the beginnings of new-found wisdom.

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NOTES

1. Plato, *Theaetetus*. Trans. Margaret Jane Levett, in *The Theaetetus of Plato*. Ed. Myles Burnyeat. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), 155D; 277.
2. *Theaetetus*, 155C; *ibid.*
3. *Theaetetus*, 144B; Burnyeat, 261-2.
4. *Theaetetus*, 210C; Burnyeat, 350-1.
5. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. Trans. William David Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), A.2, 982b; 692.
6. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. Trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), Bk 1, Ch. 11, 1371b5; 1365.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* Trans. Thomas Dutoit. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (Revised Edition) Trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 132.
9. Derrida, *Aporias*, 32.
10. Rene Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Part II, Sections 70-78; 353-356.
11. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, II, Sec. 76; 355.
12. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Ed. and Trans. Edwin Curley, in *Collected Works of Spinoza*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), Part III, Scholium to Proposition 2; 495.
13. *Collected Works of Spinoza.*, 595-6.
14. *Collected Works of Spinoza.*, 532.
15. *Collected Works of Spinoza.*, 523; *Ethics*, III, Scholium to Proposition 52.
16. *Collected Works of Spinoza.*, 532; *Ethics*, III, Exposition to Definition IV, in General Definition of the Affects.
17. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. I. Ed. Geoffrey Bennington and Peggy Kamuf. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 16.
18. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 137.
19. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 138.
20. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 157.
21. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 160.
22. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 306.
23. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 158.
24. Plato, *The Apology*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*. Trans. F.J. Church. (London: Macmillan, 1952), Sec. XVII, 29; 57.
25. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. II. Ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 45-54.
26. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, II, 45-54.
27. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, II, 45-54.
28. Maurice Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 41.
29. Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, with Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 49.
30. Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*, 21.

31. Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*, 23.
32. Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 338.